

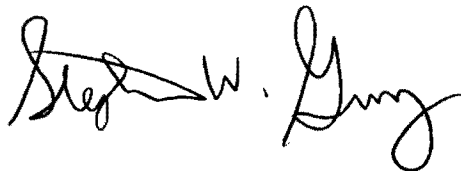
Conflicting Perceptions: Society v. Prisoners

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Mr. Steve Guy

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen W. Guy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Stephen" written in a stylized, somewhat abbreviated manner, followed by "W." and "Guy".

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Abstract

In response to the current overcrowding prison situation, many Americans are demanding a more cost-effective method of punishing offenders or even rehabilitating these individuals to prevent recidivism. Throughout history, there have been numerous ideas and programs that have been implemented to solve this problem, yet they have all proven to be ineffective. Thus, I chose to write prisoners and receive firsthand feedback as to the conditions of the prisons and any suggestions which would make prisons more effective. I wrote a wide variety of individuals who have personally experienced the practices of the criminal justice system. I also read prison literature from which I gained a better perspective as to how the entire system works. Thus, I report my findings and offer different viewpoints to address the discouraging situation of prisons.

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Conflicting Perceptions: Society v. Prisoners

Many people wonder what it's like to be dead, but not me.
I've been locked-up for years ya see.
Families don't write and you lose touch with friends.
To be treated like this should be a sin.
Out of sight means out of mind.
I only wonder how my loved ones can be so blind.
I send them letters and hand made cards.
I guess they open them up and then disregard.
So, in my world I am dead and forgotten
and it makes my existence just seem so rotten.
~Vincent Lunsford

Perspectives Outside the Bars

Everyone lives in prison: in our minds, in our thoughts, and in our movements. We imprison ourselves. Every day most of us face a monotonous, scheduled life that rarely strays from a monotonous, habitual routine. Our lives differ from those of prisoners mainly in the sense that inmates breathe the same stale air, the whole day, every day, whereas, law-abiding members of society have the opportunity to choose to walk outside and take a deep breath of fresh air. These people who breathe this stale air are former members of society who have been ostracized from and denied physical contact with the rest of the world. In essence, however, they are us and we are them, emotionally and psychologically. We are all bound by the limits of the mind and the opportunities we possess through our mind, and this similarity bridges the gap between prisoners and society, but with this bridge that is narrow and weak, it is the only bond that connects society with prisoners. Prisoners, in virtually every other aspect, are disconnected or cut off from society. Because convicted offenders are thrown into prison and soon effectively abandoned and forgotten by society, a world of exploitation, distrust, violence, disrespect, and despair is found looming behind prison walls.

Politicians often demand tougher crime policies and harsh mandatory sentencing laws and often adopt the shortsighted philosophy of “locking criminals up and throwing away the key.” While American society supported this “tough on crime” movement during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, many surveys are showing that people are looking at prisons and inmates in a new light and thinking more about rehabilitation. Most opinion polls conclude that the American public is more willing to give prisoners another chance or at least the opportunity to learn from past mistakes; furthermore, “a plurality of Americans--40%--feel that the primary purpose of the prison system should be rehabilitation” (“Prisoner”). Politicians should be aware of the results of another poll conducted by the American Civil Liberties Union, which “reveals a strong dissatisfaction with the current state of the criminal justice system in America and a growing public confidence in rehabilitation and alternative punishments for non-violent offenders,” (Beldon, *et al*). This changing attitude can be attributed largely to the growing dissatisfaction with state and federal budget spending on prisons. Despite this shift in attitudes, the increasing number of inmates and the outrageous expenditure rates for prisons clearly suggest that the problem of prison overcrowding and lack of prison reform will soon become almost unmanageable. Soon, the public will demand more rehabilitative alternatives to prison for non-violent offenders, and politicians and the criminal justice system must listen to these demands as money and space run out.

Actually, prisons have been overcrowded throughout the history of American prisons. The idea of prison as an institution first derived from England. In 1682, with the arrival of William Penn, Pennsylvania adopted “The Great Law,” which was based on humane Quaker principles and emphasized hard labor in a house of correction as

punishment for most crimes. However, by the early 1700s, there was shift to Anglican code, and punishment was often carried out as physical torture such as whipping, branding, mutilation, and other corporal punishments (Clear and Cole 37). This shift in attitude away from incarceration illustrated the effects of the changing norms and societal values towards punishment for offenders. Most of these harsh forms of punishment were used for crimes that in today's society would be considered minor offenses such as pick pocketing, burglary, robbery, counterfeiting, horse stealing, and grand larceny (38).

By the late eighteenth century, however, a shift in societal views changed the way offenders were treated; the philosophy of carrying out punishment also changed to support the notion that the environment created the offender. Humans could be reformed; thus, there were no more whippings or stocks and focus shifted to incarceration. The Pennsylvanian prisons concentrated on separate confinement and hard labor within the prison cell in order to mold a productive member of society (Clear and Cole 39-40). However, this method soon proved to be too expensive because prisons became overcrowded and this overcrowding led to the creation of the New York system by Elam Lynds, which quickly became the most popular. This system, called the congregate system, developed in Auburn, New York, which held the inmates in isolation at night, but during the day, had them working together silently. These inmates created their own goods, which the prison sold to fund the costs of confining these individuals (41). These two models during the nineteenth century were soon outdated as the Reformatory movement began.

The Reformatory movement in the late nineteenth century focused on a system called the mark system, a point system in which an inmate would receive a certain

number of points depending on his behavior. The prisoners would work during the day and then take vocational or educational classes at night (Clear and Cole 44). Once the inmate earned good behavior points, he would be considered for release. Unfortunately, however, "In most institutions the architecture, the attitudes of the guards, and the emphasis on discipline differed little from past orientations" because many claimed that officials could never accurately distinguish between the offenders who had truly changed from the prisoners "who merely lived by the rules" (44). The unpopularity and short life of the Reformatory movement is reflected in the reluctance of prison administrations to assign the length of prison sentences to prisoners.

This brought the birth of the Progressive movement which was yet another philosophy of prison reformation. The Progressive movement, formed in the early twentieth century, created four major sections of the criminal justice system still in use today: probation, indeterminate sentencing, parole, and juvenile courts. Despite the continued presence of these four sectors of what began as a revolutionary program, the Progressive movement gradually moved to the medical model of the incarceration system that viewed criminals as mentally ill. This mental illness, rooted in social, psychological, or biological problems, caused the individuals to commit the crime. Treatment and rehabilitation were the main goals of the medical model, but "critics of treatment programs in American prisons pointed out that...only five percent of state correctional budgets was allocated for rehabilitation" (Clear and Cole 48). The lack of funding led to the shift to community corrections, which concentrated on reintegrating offenders into society. A commission instituted by the president reflected this new attitude in its 1967 report:

The task of corrections, therefore, includes building or rebuilding social ties, obtaining employment and education, securing in the larger senses a place for the offender in the routine functioning of society (49).

Unfortunately, this philosophy lasted for only about a decade. Rising crime rates fostered a new and harsher movement that focused on crime control and enforced longer mandatory sentences (51). By the 1990s, the growing sentiment for prison and inmates was harsh and unforgiving as the “tough on crime” philosophy began to reflect society’s attitude. For example, “a 1994 poll... put crime as the number one concern, with 81% of those sampled favoring laws that would imprison repeat offenders for life” (Silverman and Vega 537). From the 1980s, as Jacobs, a knowledgeable criminologist noted, “crime had the most support for more spending and it has also been the most unwavering on the list” (123). Although currently, as I have already mentioned, society is gradually shifting from this “tough on crime” policy because it has not improved the plight of departments of corrections across the country: one of the major problems of corrections has continued to be overcrowding. Mauer, another well-respected criminologist, appropriately concludes,

Looking back on two centuries of the prison in America, what is particularly remarkable is how little the institutional model has changed since the nineteenth century. While the philosophical orientation and stated goals of the prison have fluctuated, the basic concept of imprisoning people in cages remains the central feature of the system (4).

In other words, even though the philosophies used to justify incarcerating individuals have changed throughout the history of prisons, in large part, incarceration and isolation from society have remained the dominant feature of American corrections.

Currently, the number of people in the United States correctional system is about 2,033,331 (*Pocket 34*), a number that exceeds the numbers locked up in every other country in the world. Additionally, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2001, states spent \$29.5 billion for prisons and the prison systems consumed 77% of the correctional costs while “the average annual operating cost per State inmate in 2001 was \$22,650, or \$62.05 per day” (Stephan). This outrageous amount reflects the permission U.S. citizens grant to the government to continue funding these costly prison practices. These costs are rising each year as The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that “the 1994 recidivism study estimated that within 3 years, 51.8% of prisoners released during the year were back in prison either because of a new crime for which they received another prison sentence, or because of a technical violation of their parole” (“In a Fifteen...”). These overwhelmingly discouraging statistics reveal the need to reevaluate the current practices of the criminal justice system.

Methods

Curious to understand the viewpoint of real-life prisoners behind bars from beyond the classroom and beyond society’s standards, I got prisoner contact information from my advisor in order to write letters and ask prisoners questions about their experiences in prison and their perspectives from behind cell doors. I have corresponded with these several prisoners throughout the past few months, posing numerous questions both to those who have been released and from those who remain incarcerated. I

organized their responses, as objectively as possible, into five broad categories: reactions to the administration in the prison, reactions to the physical surroundings of the prison, reactions to the other inmates in the prison environment, reactions to the implementation of programs inside the prison, and reactions to the criminal justice system before incarceration. It is important to note that these prisoners are more likely to be among the “success stories” of prison since they voluntarily agreed to take college level courses. These inmates may be a rarity because they show motivation and initiative to change their lives and attitudes through education. Their letters reveal many aspects of prison life and the different perspectives behind the cell doors that those of us outside the walls typically do not have access to or much opportunity—and often not much willingness—to think about.

I first wrote a letter to introduce myself and to explain that I am a Ball State student working on a thesis with the main goal of gaining insight into the “real life” inside our current correctional system. I asked if each man would like to respond to my questions and answer my letters. Each person who I wrote willingly agreed to correspond with me after I informed him that I would include these responses in my finished essay. My next letter asked several questions I chose based on the information the prisoners had given to me. I did not send each prisoner a uniform set of questions because each prisoner had given me such different responses to the introduction letter. Based upon these responses, I chose different questions for each correspondent; however, I now realize that it would have been more beneficial to ask a uniform set of questions. While each prisoner kindly offered to conduct a personal interview, I have been unable to visit any of the prisons.

Perspectives from Behind the Bars

I would like to introduce each prisoner or ex-prisoner and explain the history and background along with responses that he wrote to me. Also, it is important to note that I am not including the race of each certain correspondent since it might affect the level of acceptance or credibility among the readers. Additionally, I have added literature commentary and observations from some of the memoirs and novels about prison and prisoners that I have read in order to offer a broader range of thoughts and insights. These different sources would ensure a variety of viewpoints from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

First Correspondent: Antoine

Antoine was very eager to write. He wrote several times and offered solutions to the problems of the prison system. He thoughtfully constructed a “hallmark” card for me with a Dalmatian on the cover named “Chuckles.” He took it upon himself to break down my topic into “four categories: the perspective of a prisoner versus the intent of the system, my experiences within the system, my suggestions or advice for our justice system, and how the system has helped or hurt me.” He mostly spoke of his situation in a broad manner and did not offer specific personal experiences or examples. He often asked me about myself after a brief introduction, and he avoided addressing all of my questions, which illustrates either his inability to personally address the issues or his unwillingness to address my questions.

Second Correspondent: Antmargo

Antmargo was a pleasure to correspond with. Originally from Georgia, he offers a perspective other than that of the Midwest, and he also often writes about the

differences he has found among the state prisons in Indiana and Georgia. His job as a lab tech prepares him for the “outside.” His philosophical and poetic views of life encouraged my curiosity in him. Antmargo does not care for Indiana and wants to travel around the world and then return to Georgia once he is released.

Third Correspondent: James

Convicted for possession of illegal drugs, James was an inmate for only a year. While he has been released, James is under house arrest, but he is still able to attend classes at Purdue University. His youth--only twenty--provides some welcome insight from a younger generation. Also, he was incarcerated for a shorter period of time compared to the other correspondents who have spent decades behind bars. His short stint in prison, thirteen months, and his status as a first-time offender offer a rare perspective among my correspondents. He holds similar fears, shared by most prisoners, of recidivism, but his educational level and middle class status reduce the probability of returning to prison immensely. James has informed me that he has learned from the mistakes that he made and no longer engages in any illegal activity.

Fourth Correspondent: Earl

This inmate shared a few thoughts but mostly offered certain scenarios or examples that illustrated the shortcomings of the criminal justice system before incarceration. He did not directly address any of my questions but still seemed enthusiastic to provide information through examples. He wrote rarely because he was occupied with work and classes inside the prison.

Fifth Correspondent: Cliff

Cliff, like Antmargo, wrote on a philosophical and highly knowledgeable level that most of us would not expect of prisoners. His insights and experiences became the basis of his perception of prison. Cliff relied mostly on individualistic perceptions and characteristics of himself that limits the generalizability of his observations.

Sixth Correspondent: Bill

This unbelievable man selflessly shared his life story. Bill is a Vietnam veteran who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. Witnessing the death of his friends overseas combined with the shock of returning to the United States clearly affected him psychologically. After an honorable discharge from the military in 1967, Bill returned to work and family. However, the transition from Vietnam to the United States grew to be too much and he divorced his wife and had to quit his job because he turned to alcohol to escape from his violent memories of his experiences in Vietnam. Later, he was tried and convicted of killing a police officer during a bank robbery and has been imprisoned since February of 1972. There is some uncertainty as to who really killed the police officer since Bill was robbing a bank with an accomplice who has also admitted to shooting at the officers.

Even though Bill has been locked up for over thirty years, his positive attitude and eagerness to share the information he has collected over the years reveal the true transformation he has experienced, both mentally and spiritually. He began a prison fundraising program called Operation Love that helps to pay for debts like funeral and burial expenses for families of homicide victims (*News-Sun*). Prisoners have given over hundreds of dollars to this charity despite the fact that they earn only 65 cents to \$1.15 a

day working in the prison. Bill has worked from head electrician to a position in foodservices to a job as a chapel clerk. He sought refuge in church, as it was the only place to find peace and quiet. In 2001, he graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor's Degree from Ball State University with minors in history, philosophy, and sociology. However, the parole board has denied his release many times.

Reactions to the Criminal Justice System before Incarceration

Many critics maintain that the problem with the current criminal justice system begins with the large number of caseloads that judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys must handle daily. The amount of paperwork and the number of people circulating through the system grow each day. Thus, most cases end with a plea bargain and tend to reflect the discretionary nature of the judges and attorneys. A plea bargain is defined as “an agreement in which a defendant pleads guilty to a lesser charge and the prosecutor in return drops more serious charges” (*Webster's II* 846). The advantages of plea bargaining entail a defendant a lesser sentence and thus, less time is taken in the courtroom preparing for a lengthy trial. However, some critics argue that the plea bargain coerces the defendant to plead guilty to a crime that he or she may have not done. Thus, innocent defendants may pass through the system unfairly as they may be pressured to plea bargain in order for the judge to hear the increasing number of cases. For example, Jimmy Lerner, a convicted murderer, plea bargained his case. His story reveals his attorney's insistence on plea bargaining:

‘Jimmy, this is the formal plea bargain agreement....The D.A. drops the Murder One and you get one to six years for voluntary manslaughter and a consecutive one-to-six sentence for the use of a deadly weapon....This is a

two-to-twelve year sentence, and with good behavior, you'll be out in two.' (9).

This quotation also illustrates the practice of indeterminate sentencing in which the parole board, not the judge, decides the release date of the inmate. An advantage of this practice could be that a prisoner may be released early on good behavior; however, a prisoner may also serve the full sentence if the parole board does not set a release date until the full sentence has been served, as the case of George Jackson illustrates, "Though there was evidence of his innocence, his court-appointed lawyer maintained that because Jackson had a record..., he should plead guilty in exchange for a light sentence in county jail" (Jackson ix). Instead Jackson was sentenced to one year to life and was not as lucky as Lerner but was killed in prison after serving close to ten years—all for stealing seventy dollars, a crime he always maintained he did not commit.

Additionally, a former inmate, James states another problem: "A system that will convict someone on nothing but circumstantial evidence is the first problem." Several people who are prosecuted and convicted for crimes are poor people who most likely have little or no money, a low-paying job or are unemployed. These people typically have to rely on a public defender who may fall asleep in court or persuade the defendant to agree to a plea agreement because he or she does not have the time or the resources to adequately prepare for trial. Antoine presents this problem alongside a solution:

My perspective on the criminal justice system is that judges and prosecutors focus too much on locking criminals up for long periods of time instead of putting criminals in an environment that causes them to experience a mental transformation for the better....Instead of judges

sentencing non-violent criminals to prison, they should appoint these criminals to places that will benefit the criminals and society....

This prisoner continues to write that nonviolent criminals should be given volunteer jobs or community service. Since the nonviolent criminals pose a minimum threat, the solution would benefit both parties involved. Many critics have claimed that nonviolent criminals should be punished using other alternatives to prison because prisons are too costly and too overcrowded. Journalist Ted Conover, who spent almost a year working as a correctional officer, supports this solution, proposing that “states need to repeal mandatory sentencing laws for drug offenses” (318). Mandatory sentencing laws automatically place an offender in prison for a set amount of time no matter what the circumstances or the factors surrounding the offense. The offender must pass this time in prison and is not given any leniency. This practice places numerous offenders in prison who are receiving very little treatment though most have drug addiction problems. After they serve their time, they are released into society with the same drug habit and no money. The ex-convict will need to get some drugs to fulfill his addiction, and the only means to get money is probably unlawful since most employers are reluctant to employ ex-convicts. One way to combat this problem is to offer treatment programs and vocational training in place of prison for the addicted drug user to learn better habits and better ways of earning a living. To confront this problem, the system needs to look at the legislators and senators to change sentencing laws and sanctioning habits. Also, the criminal justice system should consider other alternatives to prison such as community service where the convicts have a chance to adjust to living in society before being released.

Reactions to the Administration in the Prison

Correctional officers are the main point of contact between inmates and the prison administration. Prison guards have “the highest rates of divorce, heart disease, and drug and alcohol addiction—and the shortest life spans—of any state civil servant due to the stress of their lives” (Conover 20). Most of my correspondents share the view that they did not mind the presence of the correctional officers as long as they did not abuse their privileges as “keepers of the keys.” The abusive power of the officers, however, often sparks feelings of resentment and hostility between the prisoners and the officers, a situation that proves to be problematic when the prisoners are locked in a cell and have nowhere to turn for help except other prisoners who are typically receiving the same treatment and facing the same restrictions. These unhealthy sentiments soon turn into feelings of bitterness and fantasies of revenge. James expressed his thoughts about correctional officers in these terms:

They were our babysitters....They are like zoo keepers and they won't hesitate for a second not to treat you like an animal. Some of them want to be your friends and others of them hate you. Some are on one huge power trip and others are real down to earth. Some want to make your life a living hell and others are just doing a job. I don't really know how I felt about them.

Another prisoner further explains the situation relating to correctional officers:

Honestly, I don't have anything against them. They have a job to do and I try to respect them, until they give me reason not to. I'm a man and I expect to be treated as such. I don't tolerate disrespect, and when I feel as

though one of them crosses the line, I let them know about it, just as I would anyone else. To them, I'm probably not being a good inmate, but like I told you at the beginning of this letter, I have a hard time assimilating into the role that I'm expected to assume. They breathe the same air I do.

This prisoner has to directly claim and state his human qualities and distinguish them from the degradation that some officers try to impose. The challenge that the correctional officer presents can become the main obstacle or barrier for the prisoner. The prisoner then feels that he must gain respect through the practice of dominance and the instillation of fear. The offender often pursues that respect among other inmates through forms of physical abuse or even rape. The tendency towards using violence to gain respect creates an unhealthy and unfriendly living environment for the whole institution and all the people connected to it, from the prison superintendent down to the medical nurses. Moreover, Antoine reveals this about correctional officers,

Criminals are expected to go through the system making a positive change; however, the way that correctional officers treat criminals--which is talking to them in an unprofessional manner, dealing with them unjustly, and even going as far as committing corrupt acts--makes it difficult to strive toward this goal.... Due to criminals being treated like animals while they are incarcerated this is why a lot of them return to society with negative thoughts and actions. If officials expect for criminals to come out of prison with positive minds then it's going to be a

must that it be enforced that correctional officers act in a professional manner.

Most correctional officers, as seen by the inmates, are compared to beasts, wild and savage animals. This comparison symbolizes the often violent and uncivilized nature of the relationship between the officers and the inmates. The complexities of this relationship between correctional officers and inmates again show the degradation of humans: humans reduced to a state of wild and undomesticated characteristics. This lack of standards illustrates how important it is for the correctional system to screen out the officers who abuse the power entrusted to them. These examples of the inmates' views of the correctional officers in the system reflect a breakdown of the already strained relationships between correctional officers and inmates.

Furthermore, Antmargo shares that most people have bad days but “sometimes the guard can be so uncaring and cruel and treat people like dirt.” He states further, “Most of all, we just want to be treated with respect....” Once these guards try to discipline the inmates and abuse their discretionary powers, most inmates lose respect for them, and once the officers lose this respect, they no longer have control of the prison block. When journalist Ted Conover wanted to write a report about correctional officer training, he asked the New York Department of Corrections officials if he could follow a correctional officer through training. When his request was denied, Conover decided to apply for a job as a correctional officer and get a first-hand experience behind the walls of prison—Sing Sing was the prison he was assigned. His book, *Newjack*, reveals his eye-opening experiences there that he recorded with great detail, and his observations and experiences offer sharp insight into the world of correctional officers as well as into the

lives of prisoners. As Conover suffered through basic training and the first weeks on the job, he found out that most communication between officers and inmates was discouraged and that many correctional officers did, in fact, view the inmates as animals. During his training to be a correctional officer, Conover states, “the main feeling” from the Department, “was that inmates were like a contagion—and the more you kept a professional distance, the better off you’d be” (221). While on duty at the watch tower or posted in the mess hall, Conover quickly sensed the numerous drawbacks and downfalls of the correctional institution such as the incessant loud rumble of the cell blocks, the administrative paperwork, and the everyday headache of dealing with it all. To rid the system of some of these problems, both Conover (318) and Jon Marc Taylor, an inmate in Missouri, claim that correctional officers should help plan and implement programming, counseling, and educational classes. If the correctional officers and the inmates learn together, Conover and Taylor argue, and open lines of communication, much of the daily frustration of dealing with each other would be relieved since they might be able to gain a level of understanding and respect for each other.

Reactions to the Physical Surroundings of the Prison

Even before entering prison, the outside prison architecture is overwhelmingly oppressive and dominant. As Malcom Braly writes, in his novel *On the Yard*,

Just entering Folsom [a prison] is desolating. You roll through two sets of double gates set in massive stone walls, and it seems you are leaving the world behind, saying farewell to everything soft and sweet, leaving forever the natural land of oceans and mountains, of women and children to enter some underworld (192).

This somber, depressing entry into prison is Braly's departure from civilization and entrance into the chaotic state of nature that Hobbes had so graphically described. Inside those prison walls, the inmates are no longer a part of civilized society, but the dregs that society has cast off, uncared for and unloved, living in a way that parallels Hobbes' brutish state of nature.

Prison life is loud and obnoxious. Prisons are cramped, uncomfortable, and offer no privacy. Inmates shower together, use the restroom in front of each other, eat together, and spend every moment together. There is almost never a moment when an inmate can be completely alone. Most of the time the prisoners are banging on cell doors or yelling to other inmates through the vents or bars. Even during the night, the lights remain partially on and the noise only subsides slightly. Thus, rest or relaxation or concentration is nearly impossible. These stressful living conditions become another source of the frustration and resentment that most prisoners feel, and these hard feelings soon build since the inmates are never relieved of these stressors.

Additionally, the standard prison cell physically bars the inmates from going anywhere and doing what they want to do. The hard and bare cell environment offers no warmth while the cracked, concrete walls, the small cot, and stained steel toilet are the new "home" to the prisoner. These Spartan amenities often symbolize the inmate's frustration with and anger at the system, especially the unyielding and unforgiving aspects of incarceration. Conover confirms this atmosphere in his description of a cell block, "All you see are the bars that form the narrow fronts of their cells, extending four stories up and so far into the distance on the left and right that they melt into an illusion of solidity" (8). Whether in New York or Indiana, prisons are permeated by a somber

and oppressive atmosphere that weighs heavily upon the flesh and the spirit of the inmates.

Even though there is nothing heartwarming about this atmosphere, most prisoners realize the need to recognize this horrible place as home. Antmargo shares these thoughts: “I can’t speak for everyone considering physical surroundings, but I have personally adjusted to mine. Notice, I didn’t say ‘gotten used to’. I don’t think that will ever happen.” One ex-con admits, “And in order to survive those years I had to *become* a prisoner, or else go mad. I had to leave the world behind and adjust to being in a cage.” The inability of these prisoners to become accustomed to their living space as anything other than a “cage” reflects the daily difficulties of living in confined quarters. Another prisoner explains,

When everything you ever owned, or desired to own, become, or desired to become is taken from you and replaced by enough possessions to fit in a small box and a room not quite as big as most bathrooms, with bars for doors and a lock that you can’t open, you are forced to reevaluate your priorities. For me, prison is prison not because I’m locked up, but because I can no longer enjoy the things that truly make life worth living—relationships, love, and the opportunity to share my life with the people I want to share with.

These powerful words are echoed by many locked up in the correctional system. The lack of physical freedom is continuously reinforced through the lack of relationships and the lack of personal experiences that inmates are prohibited from once behind bars. This disconnection from society is reinforced daily as inmates never can truly escape these

thoughts that they are not connected to society and will not be even after being released.

As Jack Henry Abbott, an inmate who was free for a total of nine and a half months of his entire adult life, relates, “I feel that if I ever did adjust to prison, I could by that alone never adjust to society” (14). After being rejected by society, many ex-convicts feel they can never completely regain acceptance by society.

Being confined to a small cell with another person is obviously cruelly limiting; however, segregation, confinement in the cell alone for twenty-three hours at a time, is Hades. When an inmate is forced into a small cell with only a one-hour break each day for recreation, the mental and physical anguish he must endure is unimaginable. After a few days, the inmates typically start experiencing symptoms such as hallucinations and paranoia. Even depriving them of food and water was a common practice until the mid-1970s. As Abbott explains,

There was once a form of prison discipline called *the starvation diet*. You were thrown in the hole and fed once a day just barely enough to give you the minimum nourishment to exist: to exist *in the hole*, not to exist the way the average man does.

Abbott confesses further that another inmate had told him that cockroaches were a great source of protein and Abbott soon resorted to mashing the cockroaches and placing them between two pieces of bread. He then got into the habit of collecting and eating any bugs that he could (Abbott 32). After several cases involving inmate complaints and legal challenges, the correctional system offered “better” conditions by providing only the basic minimum of food.

Segregation is often used as a last resort by snitches or any other inmates who may be threatened in the system by other inmates or even correctional officers.

Segregation offers a “safe” haven since inmates placed in segregation do not come into contact with any other prisoners, not even during their one-hour recreational time.

However, the effects of segregation and isolation exact a heavy toll on the physical and emotional health of the prisoner. Currently, segregation is offered at different correctional institutions around the country and its practices between all of these institutions widely vary by state.

Reactions to the Population of Inmates in the Prison Environment

Most prisoners feel some distrust of and disrespect toward other prisoners, and often do not care about other prisoners inside the walls. As Jacobs points out, “For most prisoners, the initial stress of entering the prison produces social withdrawal and retreat within an emotional shell” (278). Most of the inmates are segregated racially by the administration and separated by gangs in order to reduce the threat or spread of violence. Even during recreational hours and at meal times, “it was uncommon for the two races to just mix in conversation” (Carceral 16). Since they are all in the same unfortunate predicament, prison, they cannot trust each other let alone trust another race.

Additionally, Carceral, a prisoner, concludes, “...[W]hen prisoners are happier at a particular prison because of its design, structure, and benefits, then racism recedes. In prisons where prisoners have more things to hate, racism becomes much more intense” (137).

Also, all inmates are informally given a certain rank by other inmates based on the offense committed and the length of time served. Lerner is taken aback “pondering

the strangeness of this world where a murderer is held in higher esteem than, say, a dentist” while nonviolent drug offenders or first-time offenders are held in the lowest esteem (81). The newer guys must often pay other inmates to use the phone or must run extra errands for more powerful inmates. Child molesters and pedophiles are often ignored upon entry and later physically abused during riots. This fairly elaborates the inmate hierarchy, which illustrates the complexities of the subculture of prison. There are new sets of norms and codes of conducts that the inmates enforce for a new prisoner. The new prisoner, or “fish,” may be unfamiliar with this informal hierarchy, and not understanding the seriousness of adherence to this subculture may place him in a vulnerable situation. This may lead to further inmate on inmate abuse and violence.

One special group of inmates deserves more attention: recidivists. Concerning recidivists, most prisoners share the view that most return to prison only on account of parole violations, often relatively insignificant infractions such as drug violations, curfew violations, or a failure to pay fines. James, the third correspondent, observes of others, “The funny thing about prison is that everyone says that they aren’t coming back and they usually do.” Most individuals, upon release, return to the only place that they have ever known and typically to the same situation that led them to prison to begin with. Because of the austere conditions of prison life and the often-harsh reactions of citizens, the daily maintenance of paying rent, grocery shopping, and retaining a job is too taxing on an ex-inmate. This situation presents a problem as the prisoner struggles to provide for himself. Thus, the dreaded yet almost inevitable return to prison becomes a reality. Antmargo concludes, “Often, I see people leave and return--in some cases they have returned two or three times since I have been incarcerated.” Moreover, he states,

“Probably, and I think still, the best way for inmate rehabilitation starts with the person. What I see though is that most of the time the people don’t get better, they learn how to be more devious.” The unhealthy subculture of prisons becomes the environment that most must handle every day. These daily feelings of vulnerability, disrespect, distrust, and oppression weigh heavily on inmates emotionally and psychologically, and this unhealthy emotional life does nothing to help the offender, especially nothing to help prepare him or her for life on the outside.

Reactions to the Implementation of Programs inside the Prison

Abbott observes, “no one expects me to become a better man in prison. So why not say it: The purpose of prison is to ruin me, ruin me completely” (37). Silverman and Vega claim, “When inmates are idle they develop their own means of entertainment, which frequently includes activities that violate prison rules, encourage gang development, and threaten control and security” (538). All of the correspondents emphasized the need to rehabilitate. Antmargo confirms that “Here at C.I.F. [the Correctional Industrial Facility in Pendelton, Indiana] I have come to believe that the purpose and goal of the administrators is to rehabilitate ‘people’ and I use the term loosely.” He further claims, in another letter, “...I feel that one way to help more people who will possibly go to prison two or three times in their life would be to provide more education to young children.” This analysis reveals the philosophical bent of this prisoner’s observations. He focuses on the long-term goals of the system rather than merely suggesting short-term improvements that would not finally solve the problem. He continues his thoughts:

People are like projects with adulthood being the finished work. In the case of inmates and many other people, there are flaws--some in early life, some in middle life, and some in late life. Sometimes the flaws can be remedied, but most times will not be. As a result many inmates keep the same flaws and never learn and they continue to be a part of the cycle of incarceration and release--and while I can think of no alternatives to prison--I do feel that if people were really helped from childhood on the prison we have now would not be as populated....I go home soon, and by working five days a week, eight hours a day, I am preparing myself for the cycle of work I must begin when I walk out of these gates. Plus my job is mentally stimulating.

His realization of the difficulties of adjusting to life outside the prison walls indicates his foresight; he is mentally preparing himself. Another correspondent, Antoine, reaffirms Antmargo's conclusions:

Sara from an educational standpoint I only had my G.E.D. in 1994. Since that time I've become certified in autobody repair, I've earned my barber's license, I have an Associate's degree, and with two or more completed semesters I'll earn my Bachelor's degree. Also I have a couple hundred hours in carpentry. With this understanding the system made it possible for me to strive toward something and accomplish it. I must honestly say that I would not have pursued any of my accomplishments had I not come to prison.

Antmargo expands by explaining the function of the assigned jobs at the facility and stresses that the correctional system needs to address the individual and offer more programs to personally influence the inmates. These programs have clearly helped many prisoners acquire an education and gain much needed respect and a sense of self-worth.

Antoine shares more:

One of the main objectives of the criminal justice system is rehabilitation; however, a lot of criminals are not receiving the help that they need to make a positive change and this is why a high percentage of criminals return back to prison once they are released back into society.... The ordinance concerning education makes it mandatory for criminals that are twenty-one years of age and younger to attend school if they do not have a G.E.D., but why not make education mandatory for everyone that is incarcerated if education is of such importance [?]

While the need for more programming is apparent, many prisoners also realize that the prisoner must be self-motivated. Antmargo reiterates,

What stands out most to me is the fact that I and others are able to benefit from the educational programs, whether college or G.E.D. I have to admit that before I came to prison I was not interested in furthering my education.... But the change has been self-motivated.... It is the person who must desire to be different and must make the first step toward rehabilitation. This is the only way for success. Otherwise, and this is only my opinion, people will continue to get out and come back....

All of the prisoners stressed the need to pursue education further. Education is the key to “freedom,” literally and figuratively. More funds should be spent on education, which would reduce the recidivism rate, which would, hopefully, reduce the outrageous amount of funds being spent to construct more prisons. An ex-prisoner explains that “...but books and learning were always with me, they were my lifeline, and I was never able to stop thinking about real libraries,” and Conover reinforces this main point about education: “...[S]tudies have shown again and again that nothing lowers the recidivism rates like education” (318).

Moreover, concern for drug rehabilitation and treatment should become a greater focus. Many prisoners are addicted to drugs and have access to these drugs even behind bars through visitors, other prisoners, or even correctional officers. The “war on drugs” has, in fact, created a drug-infested environment in prison. Some states, such as Indiana, are realizing the need to offer treatment programs: for example, Indiana is offering a program to treat inmates with a methamphetamine addiction. As reported in the *Ball State Daily News*, “J. David Donahue, commissioner of the Indiana Department of Correction, said more than 900 of the state’s 22,140 inmates qualify for the program because their convictions are for meth use, production or related crime” (Callahan). This statistic is for methamphetamine use only. Imagine the number of inmates who have problems with heroin, marijuana, or alcohol addictions.

Personal Reflections

The surprising amount of material I have received revealing the fears and concerns of these men truly illustrates their humanity. These people are like most of us-- they have made good decisions and bad decisions. Like anyone in any position, these

men must face the decisions they have made and the consequences of these decisions; they must constantly reexamine or reevaluate their lives. Because some of these individuals have been locked up for as many as thirty years, once they are released from prison, they will face difficult adjustments to dramatic social and technological changes in society. These changes are easier to adjust to when we face them, as most of us outside the walls do, every day. However, over the course of a few decades, these changes become monumental and overwhelming for someone who has been locked in a cell with almost no connection to the outside world besides a small window and cheap TV. Throughout the few months of correspondence, I was continually exposed to deep insights into the entire experience after being released. One ex-prisoner shares his thoughts after getting out:

I had to learn how to pump a tank of gas all over again because the gas station pumps have all changed me.... And of course if it were not for the Ball State program at Pendleton I would have come out here not knowing the first thing about how to operate a computer, a serious matter all by itself.

He continues,

I have been so conditioned to my 'offender' status and am so used to dealing with just two kinds of people (guards and other inmates) that interacting with what *I* see as 'normal, regular, and right thinking' people fills me with anxiety.... I cannot forget what is behind me, and the very cells of my body remember it, are conditioned to it, and only time and effort will un-condition and allow me to recondition myself.

Many inmates shared overall insight into their entire prison experience. Most of my correspondents shared similar views that prison has been a positive and life changing experience. Despite the downfalls and the disadvantages of prisons, prison has reshaped these men for the better. Another ex-prisoner unusually admits this about the prison system:

I loved it. I hated it. Anyone who is smart enough to realize it will see that you are sometime[s] more free on the inside than you are on the outside. You have no responsibility on the inside and the decisions you make can only [affect] you so in that you are so much more free.... You have no bills, no real job, no real relationships, you have nothing but your time and granted it's time wasted but not always.

Another prisoner reiterates this point: "Prison has been a unique experience to say the least, an experience that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy, yet strange as it sounds, an experience that I needed and would hate to have to exchange for something else."

Nevertheless, throughout my research and my reading of prison novels and autobiographies, many have said that the regimented routine offers no room to prepare oneself for the outside. Once a prisoner is released, he or she knows only to return to the place and situation that led to problems in the first place. I asked several of my correspondents if they thought that they would recidivate. To return to the conditions of prison after being released is unfathomable to me. If the prison conditions were so horrible, I told myself, then people who recidivate must be either desperate or ignorant. However, one ex-prisoner concludes,

Life is really easy on the inside because you have no responsibilities and out here life isn't so easy. Other people depend on you and your choices [affect] them. I guess that's what I learned. What I do [affects] other people around me and if I can't stay out for myself then I have to stay out for those people who care about me and would be hurt by my going back.

These prisoners and ex-prisoners have shared many thoughts and insights with me, as well as many details about their lives and emotions. The solutions to the staggering problems of overcrowding and recidivism rates need to originate from the front end of the criminal justice system, beginning with law enforcement and the current judicial system to the back end, ending with release programs to ease prisoner anxiety. Until these problems are solved, taxpayers are going to have to go on increasing the prison budget and spending more money to build more prisons as the rate of incarceration skyrockets. The largest number of offenders are first-time, non-violent criminals who were selling drugs to support their drug habit, and as Ted Conover argues, "Prisons should be for violent criminals, not mainly poor men from rough neighborhoods who get caught selling or using drugs" (318). The correctional system needs to face these problems through treatment programs or community service. Such programs will also help to reduce the rate of recidivism because the cured drug offenders will be less likely to return.

Conclusions

This paper presents only a small number of the many problems that the current criminal justice system faces and has been faced with for many years. The growing proportion of the hundreds of thousands of people coming into contact with the justice

system illustrates the increasing need to pursue improvements and other alternatives to better the correctional system. This paper offers just a small and limited glimpse as to the problems of the criminal justice system. Until improvements are actively sought and effectively made, the continuing decline of prison conditions and the increase of prison overcrowding will persistently be an issue that the public will demand answers and visible solutions to. Because society is beginning to perceive the revealing statistics of prison populations and costs as a problem, dissatisfaction with the handling of some of these problems within the criminal justice system escalates.

Looking at the prisoners' perspective of prison offers valuable insight to better understand and evaluate some of the obvious problems and hopeful solutions which might alleviate the increasing pressure on the criminal justice system. As my inmate correspondence was limited and fairly short for such a vast and expansive topic, my paper offers a limited amount of collected information and data. My correspondents offered so much information and material that was not included in this paper; however, it did not go unnoticed. I included appendices to share the cooperation and kindness of the correspondents to take the time to write and to collect their thoughts and information with me. Their unique perspectives helped to identify and consider problems and solutions for the correctional system.

As society and prisoners begin to bridge a gap of understanding, both groups may make more of an effort to work together to live without such imposing limits of the mind and body. As this topic demands further research and investigation to provide a deeper analysis of problems and solutions, civilians and inmates can cooperate and push to improve corrections. The unremitting amount of material becomes intimidating and, at

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Appendix I

Letters from the Prisoners

Note to the reader: I have copied these letters from the prisoners word for word and have formatted them in the same way as the prisoners have written. I have not edited them in any way. The grammatical errors and the views expressed are of the prisoners only.

Dear Sara,

Let me begin by apologizing to you for taking so long to respond to you. I've been getting into the groove of this semester's classes and the professors. I'm sure you can relate.

I've read your questions a few times and each time I think of different perspectives but I can honestly say that I am not sure what the true purpose or the intent of the criminal justice system is. According to Indiana's 18th Amendment the penal code is supposed to be based on reformation not on vindictive justice but in the 4 ½ years I've been locked up, actually from when I first caught this case, all that I've seen is vindictive justice. Truthfully, I don't understand how the administrators of this system can even use the word justice. To me "justice" has an implication of fairness. The present system is anything but fair.

To establish some order of things I'll start with the criminal justice system as I experienced it, that is the prosecutors, judges, lawyers, and/or public defenders. What must be understood is that these people use these positions as springboards to political careers or higher public positions. Offenders in the system, especially the poor and downtrodden, are nothing more than a commodity used to make the deals that will endure a future in the industry that is perpetual (I'll explain what I mean by industry later).

The prosecutors in this state, as I've seen it, have more power than the judges. When they prosecute an individual for an alleged crime they don't need any factual or physical evidence to file charges. They use subjective interpretation to reach their conclusions as to what to charge which in many cases is based on hearsay and/or what will raise the largest public outcry once the prosecutor turns the information over to the media. The story that is given to the media may not even be true or accurate but as you may realize the basic consensus that the masses have been lulled into is the belief that if the information is broadcast over some public medium it must be true. The next the prosecutors will do is to stack as many applicable charges as they can against a defendant who is led to believe he or she can be convicted of all the charges to which the sentences will be run consecutively. Very rarely is this the case. Only in acts of violence can sentences be run together like that. This tactic of intimidation isn't bad unless you are poor or don't have the ability to pay an attorney. However, if a paid attorney cannot be acquired, except in rare instances, there is no adversarial process within the various county public defenders offices.

Public defenders are paid very little and have very large case load. Their function seems to be to go along with the intimidation ploy and convince the defendant to take a plea agreement regardless of whether the defendant actually committed the crime or not. Again, defendants are used as bargaining chips. The ones the prosecutor wants the most will receive the worst deal while the P.D. trades off with the ones the prosecutor wants the least.

The judges seem to go with whatever lead the prosecutor takes. This is so that he or she will not appear "soft" on crime, which is worsened if there is no adversarial process. In most of these cases with a P.D., the circumstance of the crime—substance abuse problems, mental breakdown, etc.—are ignored in a one-size-fits-all sentencing mentality. As I said earlier, this practice is anything but fair.

I realize that what I've written may seem vague and probably hard to understand unless it's been witnessed first hand. We are all socialized to believe that the system is based on ethical moral practices but I assure you this system is only for those who can afford it. This place is definitely not filled with rich people. Anyway write me back if you like If I can clarify what I've said about the criminal justice system. In the meantime I'm going to work on the other questions you've asked. I'm also going to ask some other guys.

As far as other suggestions, one thought I've had is perhaps devising some sort of questionnaire. I'd be happy to survey some of the other prisoners if you want. There is also a news letter that you can order called "Prison Legal News"—2400 80th St. #148, Seattle, WA 98117.

Well, I'm going to close for now and look forward to helping you with your project and hope to hear back from you. Bye.

Sincerely,

Earl Wilder

P.S. I apologize for my lack of penmanship I was trying to hurry.

Dear Sara,

Pertaining to your last letter: I have a feeling you were probably looking for more for something down the line of how the DOC operates from an inmates perspective (yes/no?). But anyway, I just wanted to add to what I had said about the criminal justice system itself.

Recently, as I am sure you have heard, a ten year old girl in Crothersville (a small town) was abducted and later found murdered. While I was watching News at 6:00 on rtv 6, I saw that they had arrested a young man for committing a crime. From the beginning the police came under criticism for not responding to call quick enough by issuing an Amber Alert. Now suddenly they have a suspect. I'm not saying the guy didn't do it but according to the news report and the picture shown, he doesn't resemble the description, nor does he have a white pick-up that the suspect was id'd as driving. In spite of this info, the first thing that happened was the response of the media blasting this guys face across the state and putting the story out like the guy did it. I would almost bet that this guy has a criminal record of some sort and has probably done some time either prison or boys school. Since he's most likely poor he'll be appointed a public defender who's known and worked with the prosecutor for a long time as well as the judge. Not that it'll do any good because the guys face and story have been blasted all over the state, but more than likely won't even file for a change of venue. With all this in mind, what do you think the odds are that he will receive a fair trial? His P.D. will make these odds perfectly clear as well as the chance of him getting the death penalty. He'll get scared and plead out even if he didn't do it. I'll not even mention what's going to happen to him once he gets here, (the worst thing you can do is hurt a child.) In the end it'll take about ten years to work through the appellate process so he can get evidence in front of the Fed. Judge. Appeals courts at the State level, except in rare cases, re-examine evidence.

I'm telling you all of this to make you, and anyone you wish to share this with, aware that this is actually how our criminal justice system operates. Many times the police are more interested in closing a case than who may have done it, especially when they have egg on their face. And it is the police who release info to the media. In my case a story given to the police by an ER nurse made it in the local paper. Coincidentally it resembled no statement made by anyone at the crime seen. Perhaps we'll talk some other time about that. What I'm trying to say is I've seen first hand what these people who are sworn to uphold justice are capable of.

Anyway, I thought that you might find some of this stuff helpful so you can feel or understand some of the alienation and animosity most prisoners feel towards society. Also you might keep up on this story of the Crothersville girl to see how it plays out. Anything that's filed in the court down there is part of public record and can be (probably) obtained on a computer.

I've been asking other people about what their thoughts are on the DOC and will get something to you soon. There is also a story that was run on Frontline (PBS) on the same topic. I'm speaking regarding the criminal justice system which you may also find useful.

Well until next time...

Sincerely,
Earl Wilder

March 12, 2005

Dear Ms. Sara Thompson

Yes, of course I remember you and your inquiry. I was wondering though if you had ever received my reply and if it was any use to you? Good to learn that you did and it was. I, too, know all about finals, and still find them stressful, but none more so than when I was an undergrad taking a full load. Pulled many an all nighter' endlessly reviewing my notes and reading the highlights in my texts. Thus, my dear, I well fathom you being pressed for time and prioritizing tasks. No apologies are necessary from one Ball State grad to soon to be another.

As to the question regarding the relationships between correctional officers (i.e., Cos) and offenders (i.e., inmates or convicts or cons or prisoners, etc.), that is subject worthy of book-length analysis. I will endeavor briefly touch on some themes that maybe illuminating in the sense you may not have come across elsewhere in your research. Additionally, I have enclosed a piece I wrote nearly a decade ago concerning violence in prison that possibly, tangentially touches your thesis. If anything it may be worthy of background knowledge for greater perspective.

The relationships between guards and prisoners run the gamut from the extreme of what was portrayed in the "The Shawshank Redemption" to the long-term friendship depicted in the "Birdman of Alcatraz; both two excellent Hollywood tellings of "some of the truth" behind prison walls. Generally, however, the relationship between cons and screws is a "live and let live" within the framework of this most extreme institutional milieu. For most Cos this is just a job. Once past their initial OJT phase, and they have settled into the mainline of their particular assignments (of which can be greatly varied within a single prison: i.e., guard tower, factory supervision, general housing unit or disciplinary housing unit, movement overwatch), they settle into doing as little work as necessary. In other words, they don't usually go out of their way to hassle or interact with prisoners unless something happens right before their eyes (or in parlance of the joint, "puts them on front street," in which they must react in some way).

Conversely, most inmates just want to be left alone and not be hassled. By anyone, con or screw. As time passes, and hopefully maturity and wisdom increase, prisoners realize that the random pat downs of their persons, searches of their cells, orders to move along, show their passes or lockup are just guys doing their jobs, and such actions are simply a part of doing time behind bars.

Then, of course, there are the stereotypes we have so often been fed by the popular media. Probably because conflict, of any type, makes more interesting story telling than rather common benign day in and day out relationships. I will assume you have many of these fictional, though isolatedly realistic, relationships to draw upon for your thesis. Thus, I want to go into them here. What I will briefly relate is that there are some very good and kind people who wear the uniform. Now these exceptional people beyond the mainstream are rare. More rare, sadly so, than the assholes and sadists, they

do exist. Some of these good people was my benefit and pleasure to know both in Indiana and Missouri. Ironically, I have tried to talk everyone of them into quitting corrections and finding mentally and spiritually healthier (if not economically) work elsewhere. I felt they were too good to have their humanity slowly eroded by the maliciousness of the Orwellianesque system. In fact, one of them is recently completing their teaching credentials and has promised to leave once they are licensed. That will be both a good and sad day.

How can improvements be made in the relationships between inmates and correctional officers? That will require structural training, both of the officers and inmates. Basically this would thematically consist of “sensitivity training,” which is briefly done in some DOCs. In relation to rural, mostly white guards, supervising, generally urban, mostly minority inmates. The culture divide is wide and clashes over resulting misunderstandings common and volatile. But such training is rare, brief, and all too uncommon.

What I have experienced is that for most “joes” working as Cos, its just a job. The more the particular cons and bulls get to know one another, the smoother things run. Unless that is administrators want some program implemented or policies and procedures followed to the letter, which puts everyone on edge. If things are quiet, people relatively content, then don’t mess with it just to be “doing something.”

In the operation of “my prison” (a theoretical future world), one based upon continuous educational/vocational opportunities, inmates and officers would attend the same classes. This occurred a few times within the BSU/ISR program back in the 1980s, when an administrator had a semester of credits to earn to complete his degree. The most efficient way in his circumstance was to take classes with us cons. We both learned a lot from each other, and I believe gained a greater appreciation of one another as human beings. Everyone benefited and security was not compromised. I think such arrangements should be common, not historically rare.

I hope somewhere in all of this you will have found something that you can use in your thesis. My best regards for your project and your future plans and goals. Please give my warmest regards to Steve Guy. Now there is a man “who walks the walk, and talks the talk” of his values. I learned to be a much better writer because of his generous care and attention. And he epitomizes the belief in the value of education.

Carpe Diem,

Jon Marc Taylor

1-27-05

Sara,

What's really good yo way? I turst that all is well with you. I want you to know that I received your letter dated 1-19-05. Enclosed you will find my perspective of the criminal justice system. Hopefully it will help you.

I want you to know that I will be answering all of your questions that you put in your letter. Also I will share some of my experiences in the system with you, as well as, how the system has helped and hurt me.

If you can think of anything else that I can help you with let me know. Also if it is of any interest to you I would like to get to know you as an individual. However, if this is something that you don't have time to do I will understand. At the very least, if it's not too much to ask, I would like for you to send me a picture of you because everytime I write you I wonder what you look like. Also, if you want me to send you a picture of myself I will gladly do so because I know how it feels to wonder about someone that you actually haven't seen before.

Well Sara I want you to know that I've enjoyed communicating with you and I hope it will continue.

Respectfully,

Antoine McSwain

My perspective on the criminal justice system is that judges and prosecutors focus too much on locking criminals up for long periods of time instead of putting criminals in an environment that causes them to experience a mental transformation for the better. In a prison setting it is difficult for criminals to strive toward a positive change when the majority of individuals that they are surrounded by are negative. Instead of judges sentencing non-violent criminals to prison, they should appoint these criminals to places that will benefit the criminals and society—hospitals, children group homes, homeless shelters, and homes of the disabled. This means of punishment benefits the society because the society is always in need of aid and assistance toward helping others and the criminals will benefit by being in these types of environments because their surroundings will force them to give of themselves, thus learning how to be compassionate, humble and patient. No justice is being served just because criminals are sentenced to prison for long periods of time. There is no justice in criminals sitting in an isolated area for the purpose of thinking about their wrongdoings. Surely the victims are not receiving any justice, all they are receiving is the satisfaction that criminals will not be in society for a set time frame. True enough criminals endure mental suffering due to their sentences but an enormous amount of prison time does not guarantee that criminals will not commit future crimes.

Justice is supposed to entail equitableness but how can justice be given out fairly whenever criminals are not expected to do nothing but be confined away from society. Fairness is absent for the victims and society. If justice is to be served criminals should have to pay some type of contribution to their victims and/or society by means of spending their time aiding, assisting, and fixing up the community.

The criminal justice system needs to be improved if officials expect for a higher percentage of criminals to come out of prison as productive citizens. Criminals are expected to go through the system making positive change; however, the way that correctional officers treat criminals—which is talking to them in an unprofessional manner, dealing with them unjustly, and even going as far as committing corrupt acts—makes it difficult to strive toward this goal. The criminal justice system should not allow correctional officers to dehumanize and torture criminals instead the aim should be to rehabilitate, punish, and educate.

One of the main objectives of the criminal justice system is rehabilitation; however, a lot of criminals are not receiving the help they need to make positive change and this is why a high percentage of criminals return back to prison once they are released back into society. To make matters worse a lot of correctional officers are responsible for dehumanizing criminals because of how they treat them—addressing criminals with derogatory language, fabricating conduct reports, and implementing vindictive behavior. Due to criminals being treated like animals while they are incarcerated this is why a lot of them return to society with negative thoughts and actions. If officials expect for criminals to come out of prison with positive minds then it's going to be a must that it be enforced that correctional officers act in a professional manner.

Another main objective of the criminal justice system is to punish; however, the length of time—50 yrs, 100 yrs, 200 yrs.—that some criminals are given is torture. In exception to murder, rape, and child molestation sentences should not exceed ten years.

If criminals cannot receive the proper help and make the necessary changes that they need to better themselves within ten years than certainly additional time is not going to improve the situation.

Despite how a lot of people may feel criminals due accept that they need to be punished; however, when criminals are over punished, this is not justice. In instances such as this punishment quickly turns into torture.

The sentence structure that is currently in place needs to be revised because the time that is being given to criminals for certain crimes is unjust. A prime example is the charge of murder versus attempted murder. There is no logical reason why a criminal with an attempted murder should receive a sentence equal or greater than a criminal with a murder charge, however this is done often in the criminal justice sentence.

Finally, another main objective of the criminal justice system is to educate. However if education is such a priority then a greater percentage of convicts getting out of prison should have G.E.D.'s and College degrees. The ordinance concerning education makes it mandatory for criminals that are twenty-one years of age and younger to attend school if they do not have a G.E.D., but why not make education mandatory for everyone that is incarcerated if education is of such importance. Education is a tool that gives anyone an opportunity to broaden their scope of knowledge, so if criminal justice officials want criminals to come out of prison as productive citizens education should be mandatory for all criminals, despite their ages, that do not have a high school diploma or G.E.D..

In conclusion, the criminal justice system needs to be restructured. Justice needs to be the main focal point instead of severe punishment. Also more incentive needs to be put toward rehabilitation, just punishment, and education if criminals are too be expected to become productive citizens.

By: Antoine McSwain

Sara,

This sounds like a pretty extensive project you are undertaking; I don't know how you will complete it by April. I was going to write an essay incorporating answers to the questions you asked, detailing some of my experiences in prison, and providing you with a perspective of the prison environment and the dynamics associated with "doing time," but I understand that you have several people making contributions to this project, so I will merely answer the questions you asked. That way you will not be bored with redundancy and I will not be embarrassed by the unnecessary.

Prison has been a unique experience for me to say the least, an experience that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy, yet strange as it sounds, an experience that I needed and would hate to have to exchange for something else. Of course, I wish I didn't have to watch as many years go by as I have, and I wish that I wouldn't have lost some of the relationships that I have lost over the years because of my incarceration. I wish I could have watched my children grow up in a setting other than the pictures I have received periodically over the years. I wish I could have shared a few of my grandmother's last moments on this earth. I wish I could have been there for my sister during her time of loss and pain, and that I could have made my mother and father proud of me by becoming a productive, well-respected member of society. But wishing is like pissing in the wind: the return is never what we had hoped for. Yet, even still, prison has been necessary for me.

You often hear prisoners say that if it had not been for prison they would probably have died of a drug overdose, gang-violence, or some other form of unnatural, premature death, and even though it sounds terribly cliché, that was certainly the case in my situation. I was married, had two children, and though it was not always easy, we done alright as a family. I worked. My wife worked. We had a home, cars, nice furniture, but we had no aspirations, no high school diplomas, no desire to go to college or to experience life beyond the life we knew. We had been reduced to the limits of blue-collar living, not only in our experience, but also in our expectations.

Despite my responsibilities as a husband and as a father, partying and doing drugs was a lifestyle for me, a lifestyle I had grown accustomed to in my early teens. I started experimenting with drugs and alcohol when I was fourteen. By the time I was sixteen, I was getting high or drunk everyday. I was addicted, but I handled myself and my responsibilities fairly well—that is, until I started doing cocaine. At first, I only used cocaine regularly. In the beginning, snorting sufficed, but after awhile I needed something more to get off. I've always been an intense person, and I was true to myself when it came to partying and getting high. I started free-basing and smoking crack, two or three ounces a week. Because it was such an expensive habit, I had to sell drugs in order to maintain it. And that immersed me into a world I wish I had never been introduced to. Eventually, it led to my arrest for murder/attempted murder.

I'm ashamed of my past, and I wish that I could go back, at least to the week before my crime, and start over. Unfortunately, life doesn't afford us that luxury. There were many times in which I feel as though I escaped death. I've been shot at, stabbed. I've had

contracts on my head. Many times, I was so drunk or so high that I couldn't remember what I had done the night before, where I had been, or how I had gotten home, and so on more than one occasion I felt as though my heart was going to explode for being so amped on coke. Looking back, I can honestly say that prison saved my life, and probably the lives of my family.

Obviously, prison has been no cake walk. It has been prison all day, everyday, but it has allowed me the opportunity to rediscover myself and become comfortable in my right mind. Before my incarceration, I was self-centered, violent, and lacking in understanding for anyone who did not see things my way. Prison, however, has taught me to view life through more selfless perspective. When everything you ever owned, or desired to own, become, or desired to become is taken from you and replaced by enough possessions to fit in a small box and a room not quite as big as most bathrooms, with bars for doors and a lock that you can't open, you are forced to reevaluate your priorities. For me, prison is prison not because I'm locked up, but because I can no longer enjoy the things that truly make life worthy living—relationships, love, and the opportunity to share my life with the people I want to share it with. I hate the role I am expected to assume. I hate not being able to provide for my family, or take care of my mother like a son is supposed to. I hate not knowing my daughters like I want to know them. And I hate having to struggle every minute of everyday to maintain my sanity, my sense of reality, my humanity. But in a strange way, prison has introduced me to a freedom I never knew. I realize now that I am free to think and believe what I want. I'm free to live like I want, with the exception of the fact that I'm currently stuck in this cage. I'm free to acknowledge, understand, and accept people for who they are and not for who I have always been told they were, or who, through my own fears or biases, I thought they were. And I'm free to be me and not only who I think I should be or who I think other people want me to be—and that has been liberating in more ways than I can possibly explain.

I think one way prison has effected those changes in me has been through disconnection. To be accused, labeled, tried, condemned, and removed from society, and to be dumped into a world where almost every citizen has been exiled because he was either incapable of, or unwilling to, abide by the social contract intended to govern the behavior of the citizenry, it traumatic to say the least. And coming to grips with that new reality is equally traumatic. Facing my mistakes, my wrongs, my sins, and the deserved reactions my behaviors have procured—the labeling and losses—has forced me to step outside myself and look at me, as objectively as possible, through the lens that I assume other have perceived me. And that has been indescribably humiliating. I realize that, in many respects, I will never be able to reverse the attitudes and perceptions that others have of me, but in the larger context, that is really incidental. What matters is the person I am and the person I am becoming. I didn't like the me I was so many years ago, and I still have a lot of areas that need work, but I'm no longer that guy that was ostracized then. (I feel like I'm placing a personal ad, and that is not my intent at all. You just present me with some difficult questions; and I still haven't explained what I mean by being changed through disconnection.)

After being sentenced and forced to look at myself for who I had become and to where I had fallen, and after coming to grips with spending so many years in prison and, for that most part, being alone, lost, doomed, I was forced to look at life anew and reevaluate my priorities, which at that point were basic—staying alive and trying to find a way out of prison. I felt like an outcast, like refuse. I was so ashamed of my life and what I had become, and many times I felt like giving up, literally. But through the course of all of that, still dealing with the pain of being gone, still trying to hold on to relationships that I knew deep down inside would deteriorate. Something clicked inside of me and I was able for the first time to accept, at least enough to get me by, the changes my fate brought upon me. Of course, I believe God had a lot to do with my ability to adjust and the strength I found to keep going, but it certainly wasn't any less bearable. In many respects, it came down to perspective—I believed that if I continued to look at life the way I always had, through my own attitudes, concepts, and desires, I would drive myself crazy. In response to that, I began trying hard to view my situations, my pains, my unfulfilled wants and aspirations, through the eyes of others, and strangely enough, it helped me to face my circumstances with the courage and insight I needed to continue on. I still do that today, and it still helps.

But anyway...I've got to get to these questions or we will be up all night. I don't know how you feel about coming to prison, as a visitor of course, but if that is something that you are open to, it certainly would make the process much easier. I want to give you what you want Sara, but with school and the difficulty to explain the prison experience through pen and paper, I don't know how efficient I can be. If you would rather keep it as is, that's cool too. I was just suggesting what I believe to be a more suitable alternative.

You asked if I had friends within the system. I do, but I have many more acquaintances than I do friends. Friends, I can easily count on my fingers. With the exception of very few, most of the people here are guilty as charged. And when you consider the particulars of their cases, you can easily imagine how difficult it would be to ever trust them enough to consider them a friend. I'm sure you are extremely reluctant to trust anything any of us whom you are in contact with say, and rightly so. Trust is something that has to be earned, and there is no exception to prisoners developing friendships in prison. I try to accept all people on the grounds of how they act around me and how they treat others, and for the most part, I treat them the way that I want to be treated. But I never forget where I am and who I live around—there's too much at stake. And likewise, I hope that you will always keep in mind that you are dealing with convicts when you undertake projects similar to this one. Myself included. I don't like being in that boat, but unfortunately that's where I'm at, so I shouldn't discriminate.

How do I feel about my victims? I wish that none of this would have ever happened. My friend died as a result of my poor choices, and no matter what I do or what I wish, I can't change it. It sucks. It hurts. It makes me feel sad and empty and lonely when I think about it, and it makes me realize how unfortunate and final are the things we can't change. And when I think about the relationships he was torn from and the pain those people have had to endure because of me, it rips me apart. For the other guy, I'm

remorseful. And likewise, I wish that none of this would have ever happened. I'm responsible for my part in this whole thing, but he is responsible and partially to blame for the outcome of it all too. It's easy for me to sit here and talk about how sorry I am for hurting him, but in reality, he hurt me much worse than I ever hurt him. If he hadn't invited himself that night and tried to run game on me, none of what jumped off would have. My friend would still be alive. I would still be Dad to my girls. And I wouldn't have had to carry this unbearable burden for all of these years. I shot him, but he was trying to kill me. I admit that I should have to pay for that, but I feel that I have. He didn't die, but I have died a million times since then.

But anyway...that's neither here nor there. You asked how I felt about correctional officers. Honestly, I don't have anything against them. They have a job to do and I try to respect them, until they give me reason not to. I'm a man, and I expect to be treated as such. I don't tolerate disrespect, and when I feel as though one of them crosses the line, I let them know about it, just as I would anyone else. To them, I'm probably not being a good inmate but like I told you at the beginning of this letter, I have a hard time assimilating into the role that I am expected to assume. They breathe the same air I do.

I realize that I still haven't answered all your questions, but I have to go. I'll try to write again in a few days.

Take care, and write when you can. I look forward to hearing from you

Cliff

Greetings Sara,

May these words reach you in health and good cheer. I am glad that I am able to help you, and I hope that you do well on your project. How did I end up in Indiana? I was working with a company that travels from state to state. I was a salesperson. I have been to many other states, but only as far west as Illinois and as far east as the coast of Virginia and under the Atlantic. I would like to travel to many other places in the U.S., and there are many beautiful sights to see; first I have to reclaim my freedom. Do you like to travel? No matter where I traveled, my heart will always be in Georgia. That's my home, and I know my area, I am familiar with my birthplace. Being down South is so much different from the Midwest. Is it just me or are the people much nicer back home? I am not a racist person; wasn't raised that way. Here in the 6 years that I have been in Indiana, I've seen more racism than in my previous 22 years. (I am 28) I miss my family and haven't seen them since 99. But also in Georgia, I had a feeling of freedom—not like a freedom from incarceration but the type of freedom that an eagle must fill when it soars and glides through the sky.

I'll tell you, my college experience will help me to more fully appreciate the Southern way of life. I have learned so much and I hope that I can apply it in some type of work field. Speaking of work, before I became a lab tech, I was a diet cook, tutor, and a bakery clerk. I don't remember whether I mentioned this in my last letter. Anyway, the position of lab tech was offered to one by a staff member & inmate and I accepted. At first, I was very nervous because of the work involved remembering and copying and repeating various quality assurance procedures. I felt like a college freshman on the first day of class with a room full of juniors and seniors. But I caught on and so far everything has worked well. I enjoy what I do and especially so since I have to eat the food as well.

It would probably be to my benefit to learn more about the U.S. criminal justice system, but to be honest, I am not interested. As crude as that may sound I ask you to please not be offended. Maybe once I am released and can proceed at my own pace I might change my mind, but not now. Other inmates do take quite an interest in the justice system—maybe because they have so much time on their sentence, or maybe they are bored and just want to pass the time. Good for them. Probably, and I think still, the best way for inmate rehabilitation starts with the person. What I see though is that most of the time the people don't get better, they learn how to be more devious. That's sad. If the D.O.C. offered more timecuts in areas that inmates would continue to use upon release, now that might make a difference. For instance, a distribution requirement for an assc's degree is either Art or Music History. Honestly, how many people do you know that actually go on to have careers based on either of these two subjects? The D.O.C. should have sincere marriage counseling classes, a hands on type of parenting class, real anger management classes, & a host of other programs. Now don't get me wrong, they do provide these classes, but currently the classes are merely a joke considering the amount of people who truly learn anything from them.

As for the D.O.C.'s making money off prisoners and prisons, I must beg your pardon. All of the things I know are just hearsay and I cannot cite a credible source at this time. I have heard that the D.O.C. get so much money every day that each inmate is incarcerated. Here lately there have not been enough clothes, or should I say suitable clothes for inmates. For example, with the current wave of weather we've had, there are

not adequate footwear, gloves, or headgear. Many people ask where the money is going. Again, I am not familiar with the ins and outs of the D.O.C. business or where the money goes. But one can't help wondering.

Then there are the guards. Already we are restricted, forced to construct our daily lives around a series of buzzers that signal when to get up, when to go to bed, when to eat, buzzers for everything. Sometimes the guards can be so uncaring and cruel and treat people like dirt. It is understandable that everyone has bad days, but what would happen if the pres. Of the U.S. took out his anger on his subordinate everytime he had a bad day? Now I am not saying that people here will revolt and I don't even condone it. But I can guarantee that sometimes the people have the feeling and sometimes they do strike back, as I can be verified to by the various guards who have been attacked whether they (the guard) provoked the situation or not. Most of all, we just want to be treated with respect and no falsehoods. Personally speaking, I don't care if a person likes me or not, I can deal with that because that person has taken a stand. What I dislike is when someone pretends to like me or not like me when in actuality the opposite is the truth.

Once again, I have reached the point of conclusion. I enjoy hearing from you and writing to you. I hope that I have been able to tell you some things that you find helpful to your project and I wish you much success.

I have rarely had the opportunity to have a pen-pal, and more than that, to have a faceless pen-pal. Do you think that it would be alright if we exchanged photos? Your call. No matter what you decide, I will still be willing to write and give you any information that I have. Remember, it is your call.

Your pen-pal,
Antmargo Juan Peacock

3/3/05

Dear Sara,

What I have been wanting to show you by the introduction into my life before prison and after coming to prison, is the “big lie” the system, through the media sources, newspapers and Television, spreads. It’s all “politics.” It’s about the perception that one must show he/she is tough on crime in order to get votes and to be elected.

In the minds of general public, we send men and women to prison to firstly be punished as a deterrent to crime and secondly, if we are lucky, to be rehabilitated. (Rehabilitation is an individual’s choice. It begins with new truth, thinking, and hope.) It is not accomplished by state programs and processes.

But in truth, as I hoped to show you with the paper I have given you, the system is not honesty or fair—it is political.

In the articles I have enclosed, I have years of coverage and dozens, maybe hundreds, of these kind of articles. But I’m only sending you a couple to contrast the point I’m making. I fought a war for my country and suffered because of it. No amount of good that one can do can ever make up for the loss of an innocent, human life. But I’ve worked hard to change the loss person I became after the war. But, none of it is recognized—the “lie.” All they ever talk about is what happened in 1972—33 years ago. It is as if the past 33 years never existed. Yet, all these years in prison officials have said, do good, stay out of trouble, do what’s right and it will pay. Well, I do not intend to stop doing what’s right and I’m asking for no sympathy—I’m just trying to help you see the system for what it is. I’m okay with my life, but as you have noticed from some of my letters, I don’t trust many people. But I do trust you.

Getting back to it. Norman Woodford, articles enclosed, made parole for the same thing I’m incarcerated for. He never fought a war for his country and suffered for it. He didn’t have the good record the media said he did. I knew him all those years. He did less time than I. And he isn’t the only one that has killed a policeman and been left to go home on parol. It is political. If you have victims that scream LOUD, that get too much public attention, that could threaten the loss of votes, no matter how good your prison record is, you will be kept in prison. The system should not be run on the say of persons who are obviously vindictive. Sure victims hurt—I understand that, but to do the taxpayers business with the foundation being revenge—well that is not rationale.

In my opinion, politics, as far as can be done, should be left out of the Correctional System. After conviction, correction people should determine your progress and release based on that progress and release based on that progress and NOT Politicians based on the cry of victims or others seeking political off.

In Indiana, the Parole Board is appointed by the Governor. In many states, they have done away with Governor appointed Parole Boards and formed a Committee within Corrections to eliminate some of the politization of the Correctional System.

Of course, In 1979 Indiana's General Assembly passed a new penal code. I'm under the old penal code. The new penal code gives good time off for good behavior. In this way, the Legislature took the politics out of the new code, but politicians through the victims rights groups still control the old code cases such as mine.

As far as I have looked, the media and police in America have served the elite in America.

In sociology, I read where the police shot men, women, and children during the great depression at the say of factory owners. They murdered whole families because the protested the very poor working conditions. Many of them were shot in the back.

The media too, they speak the will of the rich. The police have always been the muscle of the rich and the media their mouth piece in America.

For example, the articles about me, they say the officer was executed in cold blood. That is far from the truth. The officers started shooting first, I've told them the truth. But they don't care. The lie keeps me in prison and sells lots of papers and TV time. I don't see you or I changing this Sara. But you are just learning about the system and you should be aware that what is said doesn't equal "reality." (Why do you think Governor Daniels has hit a wall and lost the bid for an "inspector general" in Indiana? Did he actually think that Legislature was going to give a job to someone who would be looking over their shoulder?—NOT!)

Next letter, I want to talk a little about victims' rights groups if that's okay.

I hope my writing doesn't sound bitter—because I'm really not. And I'm not "crying" about poor Bill here. Basically my life is over. Maybe, if I'm lucky and the Lord sees fit, I have another 10-15 years at the most. If the state wants to take care of me to satisfy the cry of the vindictive people, that's on them. But I say, at least do it by being honest. No need for them to lie and manipulate public outcry like they do.

I have two daughters, Melanie and Elizabeth. Mel is an investigator for the inspector general in PA. Liz lives in Florida. I love both my girls very much and as far as I know, they love their Dad even though they haven't been there. Reason I'm telling you this is because Mel is going to adopt a girl (2-3 years old) this year. I have a grandson (Austin) by Liz, but this will be my first granddaughter. Yes, since Mel is not married (but engaged) her last name will be Adams. She's going to the Ukraine to get her. It is costing her \$20,000. Whow! When I get a picture of her, the fall, I will let you see her. I know she's going to be beautiful like her mom.

I write and call my girls regularly. The world may think me a good for nothing, but not my girls and you Sara—smiles.

Mel and future husband will visit this summer, they said.

I'm sorry I don't write neater. I have no patience for penmanship. I like the computer but can't use it for person use.

Bill

P.S.-The VA increased my disabilities from the war by 10 percent for PTSD. I now have 50 percent benefits.

P.S.S. 2001 was the first time the media gave me a chance to speak.

4/4/05

Dear Sara,

I pray that all is going well for you in school and out. I hope you do not think my ideas that I have written about are too ridiculous for you to think about.

Enclosed is another idea that I have written about. It is not finished but you will get the general idea from reading it.

Take Care,

Your Friend Bill

P.S. I wish you well in all that you do.

Appendix II

Copies of the Original Letters from the Prisoners

Note to the reader: These are scanned copies of the original hand-written letters from the prisoners. I have duplicated them in the way that they were sent to me. I have chosen to include these letters to better personalize these individuals behind bars and the stories and insight that they have shared with me. Some are copies of the type written letters in Appendix I and some I have included to offer even more examples of the material that I have been reading and organizing for the past semester.

Dear Sara,

Let me begin by apologizing to you for taking so long to respond to you. I've been getting into the groove of this semester's classes and the professors. I'm sure you can relate.

I've read your questions a few times and each time I think of different perspectives but I can honestly say that I am not sure what the true purpose or intent of the criminal justice system is. According to Indiana's 18th Amendment the penal code is supposed to be based on reformation not on vindictive justice but in the 4 1/2 years I've been locked up, actually from when I first caught this case, all that I've seen is vindictive justice. Truthfully, I don't understand how the administrators of this system can even use the word justice. To me 'justice' has an implication of fairness. The present system is anything but fair.

To establish some order to things I'll start with the criminal justice system as I experienced it, that is the prosecutor, judges, lawyers and/or public defenders. What must be understood is that these people use these positions as springboards to political careers or higher public positions. Offenders in the system especially the poor and disadvantaged are nothing more than a commodity used to make deals that will ensure a future in the industry that is perpetual (I'll explain what I mean by industry later).

The prosecutors in this state, as I've seen it, have more power than the judges. When they prosecute an individual for an alleged crime they really don't need any factual or physical evidence to file charges. They use subjective interpretation to reach their conclusions as to what to charge which in many cases is based on hearsay and/or what will raise the largest public outcry once the prosecutor turns the information over to the media. The story that is given to the media may not even be true or accurate but as you may realize the basic consensus that the masses have been lulled into is the belief that if information is broadcast over some public medium it must be true. The next thing the prosecutors will do is to stack as many applicable charges as they can against a defendant who is led to believe he or she can be convicted of all the charges to which the sentences will be run consecutively. Very rarely is this the case. Only in acts of violence can sentences be run together ~~to~~ like that. This tactic of intimidation isn't bad unless you are poor or don't have the ability to pay an attorney. However, if a paid attorney cannot be acquired, except in rare instances, there is no adversarial process within the various county public defenders offices.

Public defenders are paid very little and have very large case loads. Their function

seems to be is to go along with the intimidation play and convince the defendant to take a plea agreement regardless of whether the defendant actually committed the crime or not. Again, defendants are used as bargaining chips. The ones the prosecutor wants the most will receive the worst deal while the P.D. trades off with the ones the prosecutor wants the least.

The judges seem to go with whatever lead the prosecutor takes. This is so that he or she will not appear "soft" on crime, which is worsened if there is no advisory process. In most of these cases with a P.D., the circumstance of the crime - substance abuse problems, mental breakdown, etc. - are ignored in a one-size-fits-all sentencing mentality. As I said ~~earlier~~ earlier, this practice is anything but fair.

I realize that what I've written may seem ~~very~~ vague and probably hard to understand unless it's been witnessed first hand. We are all ~~so~~ socialized to believe that the system is based on ethical moral practices but I assure you this system is only for those who can afford it. This place is definitely not filled with rich people. Anyway write me back if you like. If I can clarify what I've said about the criminal justice system. In the meantime I'm going to work on the other questions you've asked. I'm also going to ask some other guys.

As far as other suggestions, one thought I've had is perhaps devising some sort of questionnaire. I'd be happy to survey some of the other prisoners if you want. There is also a news letter that you can order called "Prison Legal News" - 2400 NW 80th St. #148, Seattle, WA 98117.

Well I'm going to close for now and look forward to helping you with your project and hope to hear back from you. Bye.

Sincerely,

Carl Riblin

P.S. I apologize for my lack of penmanship I was trying to hurry.

SARA,

What's good yo way? I hope that all is well with you. As for myself, I'm doing good under the circumstances.

Anyways the main reason that I am writing this letter is to share with you some of my experiences in the system.

SARA from an educational standpoint I only had my G.E.D. in 1994. Since that time I've become certified in Autobody Repair, I've earned my Barber's license, I have an Associate's degree, and with two more completed semesters I'll earn my Bachelor's degree. Also I have a couple hundred hours in carpentry. With this understanding the system made it possible for me to strive toward something and accomplish it. I must honestly say that I would not have pursued any of my accomplishments had I not come to prison.

In addition, I've invested a lot of my time toward writing lyrics (Rap) and I also write a little poetry. However my true love is writing Rap lyrics. Currently I am working toward completing my fifth album and on average

2).

I put sixteen songs on each album.

SARA I am internally happy that I was able to shape and mold my ~~writing~~ lyrical writing skills but had I not come to prison, it is highly unlikely that I would have invested so much time toward it.

SARA Another thing that I invest time toward is brainstorming. I enjoy coming up with different types of inventions and business concepts and once I am released back to society I plan on introducing some of these ideas to the world; however, I know that had I not been in an environment to explore my mind a lot of my ideas would have never came forth. With this understanding I am sure that you can see that the system has helped me.

On the flip side of things, I've only been in two physical altercations since I've been incarcerated. One of those fights ended up in me experiencing disciplinary segregation because I broke the dude's jaw that I got into it with. Out side of those two incidents I've been fortunate

3)

not to be involved in other conflicts.

SARA I have witnessed guys get severely beat and knocked-out. Also I was within ten feet of a guy ^{who} ~~that~~ had a bucket of hot scolding water thrown on him when he was asleep. I've been in close proximity of a guy who died in his cell. I've seen the after result of a guy who attempted to slit his wrist. I was in close proximity of a guy who threw his own feces on another guy, and I actually talked to a guy on the regular basis who had AIDS. He shared with me his thoughts, feelings, pain, daily rituals, and life experiences.

Well SARA, as you can tell, from my point of view prison has its good and bad aspects; however I do believe that the good can outweigh the bad if an individual takes advantage of the opportunities inside of prison.

Respect,
Antoine McSwain

1-9-05

Dear Sara,

I'm glad that you took the time to write. I know it can be difficult to write a total stranger, especially one who is in prison. I also know that with the stereotypes so commonly associated with prisoners, you had to exercise a measure of courage and exhibit an uncommon willingness to be objective and step-out beyond what you are probably accustomed too. I appreciate that and hope that you never lose that quality. I don't mind helping you with your project, but before we proceed I want you to know that it's okay to relax - you don't have to call me mister. We can keep our correspondence formal if you like, but I would really appreciate it if you would try to divorce yourself, at least partially, from any preconceived notions you may have about prisoners and view me as someone who made some bad choices and costly mistakes when I was younger. I'm not asking you to change your perspective, whatever they may be. And I don't expect you to trust me or see things from my point-of-view. Trust is something that must be earned if it's to have any real value, and my point-of-view may be terribly skewed - I've been in prison for 16 years. I will always be honest with you, and I will answer your questions as thoroughly as possible. Feel free to ask me whatever you wish; no question is too personal or

inappropriate. I'm pretty down to earth, so you don't have to dance around the bushes with me! 😊 You can be as brutally honest and inquisitive as you need to be. In fact, I prefer that. Social etiquette can sometimes be overrated, especially when trying to understand people or discover truth.

From your letter, it appears as though your project is going to be extremely complex. When is it due? Can you give me some of the particulars? What type of paper will it be? Length? How in depth are you going to explore the subject? I'll do as much as I can, but you're gonna have to tell me what you want. ~~_____~~

Okay?

(realize that this letter leaves much to be desired, but it's late and I wanted to get it in the mail tonight.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Take care of yourself, and stay out of trouble. It's not always as fun as it seems 😊

1-23-04

Greetings Sara,

May these words reach you in health and good cheer. I am glad that I am able to help you, and I hope you do well on your project. How did I end up in Indiana? I was working ~~with~~ with a company that travels from state to state. I was a salesperson. I have been to many other states, but only as far west as Illinois and as far east as the coast of Virginia and under the Atlantic. I would like to travel to many other places in the U.S., and there are many beautiful sights to see; first I have to reclaim my freedom. Do you like to travel? No matter where I have traveled, my heart will always be in Georgia. That's my home, and I know my area, I am familiar with my birthplace. Being down South is so much different from the Midwest. Is it just me or are the people much nicer back home? I am not a racist person; wasn't raised that way. Here in the 6 years that I've been in Indiana, I've seen more racism than in my previous 22 years. (I am 28) I miss my family and haven't seen them since 99. But also in Georgia, I had a feeling of freedom — not like a freedom from incarceration but the type of freedom that an eagle must feel when it soars and glides through the sky.

I'll tell you, my college experience will help me to more fully appreciate the Southern way of life. I have learned so much and I hope that I can apply it in some type of work field. Speaking of work, before I became a lab tech, I was a diet cook, tutor, and a bakery clerk. I don't remember whether I mentioned this in my last letter. Anyway, the position of

Lab tech was offered to me by a staff member & inmate and I accepted. At first, I was very nervous because the work involved remembering and copying and repeating various quality assurance procedures. I felt like a college freshman on the first day of class with a room full of juniors and seniors. But I soon caught on and so far everything has worked well. I enjoy what I do and especially so since I have to eat the food as well.

It would probably be to my benefit to learn more about the U.S. criminal justice system, but to be honest, I am not interested. As crude as that may sound, I ask you to please not be offended. Maybe once I am released and can proceed at my own pace I might change my mind, but not now. Other inmates do take quite an interest in the justice system - maybe because they have so much time on their sentence, or maybe they are bored and just want to pass the time. Good for them. Probably, ~~the most~~ and I think still, the best way for inmate rehabilitation starts with the person. What I see though is that most of the time the people don't get better, they learn how to be more devious. That's sad. If the D.O.C. offered more timecuts in areas that inmates would continue to use upon release, that might make a difference. For instance, a distribution requirement for an assoc's degree is either Art or Music History. Honestly, how many people do you know that actually go on to have careers based on either of these two subjects? The D.O.C. should have sincere marriage counseling classes, a hands on type of parenting class, real anger management classes, & a host of other programs. Now don't get me wrong, they do provide these classes, but currently the classes are merely a joke considering

the amount of people who truly learn nothing from them.

As for D.O.C.'s making money off prisoners and prisons, I must beg your pardon. All of the things I know are just hearsay and I can not ~~not~~ cite a credible source at this time. I have heard that the D.O.C. gets so much money for every day that each inmate is incarcerated. Here lately there have not been enough clothes, or should I say suitable clothes for inmates. For example, with the current wave of weather we've had, there are not adequate footwear, gloves, or headgear. Many people ask where the money is going. Again, I am not familiar with the ins and outs of D.O.C. business or where the money goes. But one can't help wondering.

Then there are the guards. Already we are restricted, forced to construct our daily lives around a series of buzzers that signal when to get up, when to go to bed, when to eat, buzzers for everything. Sometimes the guard can be so uncaring and cruel and treat people like dirt. It is understandable that everyone has bad days, but what would happen if the pres. of the U.S. took out his anger on his subordinates everytime he had a bad day? Now I am not saying that people here will revolt and I don't even condone it. But I can guarantee that sometimes the people have the feelings and sometimes they do strike back, as can be verified ~~to~~ by the various guards ~~to~~ who have been attacked whether they (the guard) provoked the situation or not. Most of all, we just want to be treated with respect and no falsehoods. Personally speaking, I don't care if a person likes me or not, I can deal with that because that person has taken a stand. What I dislike is when someone

pretends to like me or not like me when in actuality the ~~opps~~ opposite is the truth.

Once again, I have reached the point of conclusion. I enjoy hearing from you and writing to you. I hope that I have been able to tell you some things that you find helpful to your project and I wish you much success.

I have rarely had the opportunity to have a pen-pal, and more than that, to have a faceless pen-pal. Do you think it would be alright if we could exchange photos? Your call. No matter what you decide, I will still be willing to write and give you any information that I have. Remember, it is your call.

Your pen-pal,

Antmargo Juan Peacock

Dear Sara,

Thank you for your letter. I'm very please to see that someone, anyone, is interested in the Correction System of Indiana and prisoners.

As you may know, I have been incarcerated for 33 years. I have often wanted to express my fears, but because of my crime, I would just be ridiculed as a bittered, convicted person. That's how it is today.

If you are a convicted person, you are treated as one of those who cannot be trusted. The media is a lot to blame for that categorization. No longer, in life, can a man/woman make a mistake and be forgiven. Once labeled a "convicted person", you are a convicted person forever. Forgiveness and mercy have become things of the pass in Indiana Correction. In fact, to call it the Indiana Department of "Correction", is a joke. ~~It~~ It certainly corrects nothing.

Some of my views and opinions and experiences will seem unbelievable to you. But I have lived them; I won't lie to you.

I think you have picked a great thesis. One

that many would not take on because of the work required and the lack of enthusiasm for prisoners and the feeling that prisoners deserve the worst system and punishment it can provide. Sad isn't it?

In answer to your letter, yes, I will help you, but I'd like to have a copy of your final.

It is an ugly story. One that telling the truth about will be denied on every "political level."

Please don't think that I'm bitter or seek revenge, or that in general I don't like people. To the contrary, I love people, I hold no grudge against anyone, and I'm only some bitter at the system because of its untruthful ways.

The system for the most part ~~is~~ the people who work it for all its worth. It could work, but they are not personally capable of letting it work. We get the worst of the worst in about 96 percent of them.

Bill

2/14/05

Dear Sara,

Thank you for your kind letters. As I think about it, you may use the personal writing that I sent you if you please, and if it is not a critical depiction of my family. Many people still do not understand what the poor - poor families go through in America. I sent it so you would know who I am and where I came from. Since my father is gone and my mother is very old and in a home in Martinsville, Ind., ~~there~~ there is nothing that you could say to hurt their feelings. (It is highly unlikely that my mother would read your thesis - smiles.) Use it if you want.

Instead of writing so much, I'm giving you stuff that is factual for you to read and see for yourself. The enclosed material herein ~~that~~ will give you an idea of who I am since coming to prison and now in prison. I compiled this material in 2001 for the Indiana Parole Board, and even though I have updated a few things it has not been completely kept up. But it will tell you who I am in prison and if you have any questions, I will answer them for you. (I will send you other stuff, too. Then, when you are all read up - smiles, I will answer questions about the system - my thoughts and opinions, etc. if that is okay

with you and what you need.)

So, now, after you read this material, you should know who I was before prison and during incarceration. As you can see, Vietnam played a big part in my fall even though the system of vindictive politics will now recognize that.

Don't hesitate to ask the questions you want answered. I have the questions you have asked me before and I will answer them in due time.

Take care of yourself and may the Lord Bless and watch over you.

Bill



4/4/05

Dear Sara,

I pray that all is going well for you in school and out. I hope you do ^{not} think my ideas that I have written about are too ridiculous for you to think about.

Enclosed is another idea I have written about. It is not finished but you will get the general idea from reading it.

Take Care,

Your Friend Bill

P.S. I wish you well Sara in all that you do

Appendix III

Essays Written by the Prisoners

Note the reader: These essays are writing samples of some of the written work that the prisoners have done voluntarily. I have chosen to include these essays to further illustrate the intelligence and the persistence of the prisoners to educate themselves and people around them. Again, these views expressed are of the prisoners and have not been edited in any way by my advisors or me.

The High Cost of Determinate Sentences

Recently, the United States Supreme Court, and the Indiana Supreme Court, has taken an interest in sentencing laws and practices. In Indiana, changes in the sentencing laws occurred in the late 70's when the Indiana General Assembly changed the penal code from an indeterminate to a determinate sentence structure. Now twenty-five years later, we have seen multiple problems develop from determinate sentences. Under determinate sentences, self-improvement and hope have been eliminated from Correctional goals. The state's economy has been reduced to rubble. And crime has not decreased but has increased violence against the public.

Under the indeterminate sentence structure, self-improvement and hope were significant Correctional goals. People changed, people were evaluated, and in due time, people were reunited with their families to become productive citizens of society. Getting caught for doing wrong meant accepting punishment, serving time, and starting anew; by no means did it mean the end. But now under determinate sentences, self-improvement in Corrections means nothing. And hope is not there to encourage the lost. In fact, it is the end and hope lost makes for a dangerous situation. Look, for example, at a person serving sixty years today. That person must serve no less than thirty calendar years before being released. If that person changed and warranted release after twenty years, it would make no difference, because under the determinate sentence structure the law mandates that person continue to serve ten more years at taxpayer expense. It is a futile and self-defeating sentencing code.

In one way or another, the determinate sentence structure pervades every aspect of our lives, but no one today dare acknowledge that for fear of being labeled soft-on-crime. Nevertheless, these facts are undisputable. The Indiana Department of Correction's resources have been stretched to their limits. Most Indiana prison facilities have become dangerously overcrowded with double bunking now the norm. Some prisoners have even been sent to other states and warehoused at taxpayer expense. New prisons have been built but left uncompleted or only partially opened. Education for our children has been set aside because money has been funneled to Corrections. And, the state's economy has been subdued by a six-hundred-million-dollar deficit, which is still growing.

Moreover, no cost associated with determinate sentences has been as high as the cost to public safety. It is no secret today that the harshness of determinate sentences has caused criminals to do whatever it takes to avoid getting caught and going to prison. Over and over again, we have seen it played out in senseless acts of murder. Whole families and groups of employees have been cold bloodedly murdered because someone recognized a perpetrator. Store clerks, gas station owners, restaurant managers, and many others have been cold bloodedly murdered for no other reason than eliminating witnesses to prevent capture. Law-enforcement officers' lives have been put in greater danger because criminals have refused to give up and face determinate sentences, which they see as the end. Before determinate sentences came into being, people were not cold bloodedly murdered for two dollars. In essence, determinate sentences have brought greater violence down on the public.

Today, if we are to get back on the right track, we must restore a rational basis to our sentencing laws. And a long the way, we must take courage and face those who would accuse us of being soft on crime when in fact we are most interested in public safety and laws that work for and not against us.

COMMENTARY

The View From Inside Prison Walls

By Jon Marc Taylor

The late Malcolm Forbes once said it was "more fun to arrive at a conclusion than to justify it." Brookings Institution senior fellow John J. DiIulio has certainly arrived at a conclusion, but his justifications range from questionable to hogwash.

DiIulio has passionately advocated that what the country needs are more prisons. He cites studies (two of which are conveniently his own) observing that those in prison committed several crimes prior to their current incarceration and/or are not simply first-time drug offenders over whom many lament. In short, by the multiplicity of their criminal histories, they deserve to be behind bars for the public safety.

What DiIulio does not mention is that nearly two-thirds of state inmates have never been incarcerated before, nor have a majority of them been convicted of a violent crime. Of the third who committed a violent act, for half of them it was their first arrest. All told, fewer than 50 percent of all prisoners are incarcerated for committing violent crimes.

Several classification studies have found that as few as 20 percent of the prison population are extremely violent offenders who must be incarcerated for extended periods of time. A Senate survey in 1994 disclosed that prison wardens believe that "half of the offenders under their supervision would not be a danger to society if released."

Also, criminologists John Irvin and James Austin surveyed 52,000 Americans regarding the level of seriousness of 204 criminal acts compared to the criminal histories of randomly selected inmates from three states. They found that half were considered petty criminals, with only 20 percent viewed as serious offenders.

DiIulio next proclaims that prisoners are not doing a lot of hard time under horrible conditions. He states that despite the enactment of mandatory minimum laws between 1985 and 1992, "the average maximum sentence of prisoners declined about 15 percent." DiIulio, however, is comparing total overall sentences imposed, not the amount of time actually served.

Over the past decade, the number of convicted drug offenders sent to prison, with relatively shorter sentences when compared to violent offenders, has tripled. This has skewed the overall average, lowering the national sentence length. However, the actual amount of time served behind bars has grown tremendously, because of generally longer sentences for all crimes and reduced "good behavior" paroles.

Between 1985 and 1992, the number of months violent criminals served in prison increased 60 percent, property felons by 66 percent and drug offenders by 68 percent. If the months served in jail awaiting sentencing were added, these figures

would increase another 20 percent. Furthermore, the chance of going to prison between 1980 and 1993 doubled for those convicted of car theft or sexual assault, quadrupled for weapon offenses and saw a five-fold increase for drug violators.

Regarding the conditions for prisoners as a whole, the U.S. prison system is in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. Disturbingly, a recent European commission found the American prison system to be the "most barbarous" among the Western industrialized countries. Not the Michelin rating one would expect to receive if the nation's 1,600 gulags were "Holiday Inns."

Thanks to new prison construction, DiIulio states, overcrowding has abated, with a dozen states now under maximum capacity. What he fails to mention is that 85 percent of corrections departments acknowledge that overcrowding in their systems still ranges from serious to critical.

The Brookings fellow then has the temerity to claim that "half or more of each prison dollar is spent on inmate medical services and rehabilitation programs, not security basics." Balderdash! According to the Justice Department, 15 percent of state correction budgets in 1994-95 went toward rehabilitation programs and medical services. Nearly 60 percent went for security and maintenance operations.

The end result of building more prisons, as DiIulio urges, is a poorer and no safer society. The 30-year cost of building and operating one prison bed is \$1.3 million. Over the past 16 years, we've tripled our prison population to more than 1 million souls, at the expense of \$32 billion in 1992 alone. All at a cost of more pot holes in our streets, reduced times in our libraries and

reduced times in our libraries and museums, and collectively more public money spent on prisons to incarcerate the populous than on universities to educate the citizenry.

Meanwhile, crime rates have diminished only slightly. Most of the credit for that is given to the aging of baby boomers out of their most crime-prone years — not to increased incarceration. Moreover, "there is no tendency for those (states) that increased their prison populations the most to have greater decreases in crime," observe Irvin and Austin. "In fact, the opposite is true."

DiIulio comments that the "truth of prisoners' complete criminal histories will prevail with it setting very few free." One must wonder, however, whose truth he is promoting and why? Certainly it is not the view of the stark reality of America's prison system from the inside looking out.

Jon Marc Taylor is a Missouri prisoner, Jefferson City, who narrates books for the blind.

